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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MINSK 000520

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SUBJECT: INTERNAL POWER STRUGGLE HINDERS OPPOSITION MOVEMENT

Classified By: AMBASSADOR GEORGE KROL FOR REASONS 1.4 (B,D)

11. (C) Summary: High-level opposition members told Pol/Econ Chief on May 11 that the power struggle between United Civic Party (UCP) leader Anatoly Lebedko and Ten Plus Coalition candidate Aleksandr Milinkevich was hindering the opposition movement. Activists doubt the two leaders would reconcile, but do not believe Lebedko plans to pull his UCP party from the Coalition. The activists noted other problems within the Coalition, such as its indecisive political council, failure to unite with flash mob activists, and lack of preparation for important events. End Summary.

Lebedko Wants To Be Leader

12. (C) Deputy of the United Civic Party (UCP) Ludmila Gryaznova told Pol/Econ Chief on May 11 that the power struggle between UCP leader Anatoly Lebedko and Ten Plus Coalition presidential candidate Aleksandr Milinkevich was paralyzing the opposition movement. According to Gryaznova, Lebedko and his main deputies, Yaroslav Romanchuk and Aleksandr Dobrovolsky, believe that after Lebedko's years of hard work, suffering, and personal embarrassment, he--not Milinkevich--deserved to be the single opposition candidate. Meanwhile, Milinkevich's supporters, particularly Belarusian Popular Front (BPF) deputy Ales Mikhalevich, have convinced Milinkevich that he is above the other opposition leaders, and therefore does not need to work with Lebedko.

Milinkevich Deputy Doubts Reconciliation

13. (C) Gryaznova doubted Lebedko would withdraw from the Coalition because many UCP members would not follow him if he did. She believes Lebedko and Milinkevich should travel to Vilnius, without their deputies, to iron out their problems with a mediator whom they both respect, such as former Czech President Vaclav Havel. However, Milinkevich campaign manager Viktor Korniyenko told Pol/Econ Chief later that day that he doubted Lebedko and Milinkevich would reconcile, partly because Milinkevich has enough support within the Coalition to ignore Lebedko and his demands. Korniyenko agreed that if Lebedko broke from the Coalition, a sizable portion of his party would not follow. However, time was on Lebedko's side and it was incumbent upon Milinkevich to prove his worth as a coalition leader. According to Korniyenko, if Milinkevich is unable to turn the Coalition into an effective, inclusive movement by Fall 2006, then Milinkevich should step down.

An Inefficient Political Council

14. (C) Gryaznova criticized the Ten Plus political council's

indecisiveness and lack of leadership. She once attended a session as proxy for Lebedko (who rarely if ever attends the council himself and reportedly rescinds all agreements his proxies make in his absence) and left the meeting believing the entire council should be dismissed. In her opinion, such a council would be more effective if filled with advisers concerned about strategy and not about their political ambitions. She lambasted BPF leader Vintsuk Vyachorka's childlike behavior, which made him difficult to work with. According to Gryaznova, Vyachorka breaks every agreement he makes, but is an ace at playing bureaucratic games and successful at fulfilling his interests before those of the Coalition. Gryaznova opined that political council member and leader of the Women's Party Nadezhda Valentina Matusevich was a "complete zero" and speculated that she and leader of the Party of Freedom and Progress Vladimir Novosyad, who also sits on the council, had questionable BKGB ties.

Coalition Made Mistakes

15. (C) Korniyenko admitted that the Coalition made many mistakes during the elections, the largest of which was not properly using their time. He said the Coalition was not prepared as it should have been for March elections and should have held its October 2005 Congress at a much earlier date. He said one reason for this was that funding came too late, but the main delay was that decisions were not made quickly.

16. (C) The opposition leadership on March 19 was not prepared for how events unfolded. According to Korniyenko, the Coalition prepared for demonstrators to gather at Gorky Park,

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where Milinkevich was waiting in a nearby apartment for his moment to speak to the crowd. However, demonstrators "unexpectedly" gathered on October Square and the BKGB, acting quickly, seized three of the Coalition's sound systems and disconnected phone services, leaving the opposition leadership, including Milinkevich, unaware of what was happening. Korniyenko said they were better prepared by March 20, but by then the crowd was significantly smaller and the Coalition leaders knew they had missed their chance. (Note: The Coalition told people for several weeks to gather on Election Night at October Square, so Korniyenko's excuse that this occurred unexpectedly is questionable.)

No Luck Recruiting Students

17. (C) The opposition leadership recently tried to recruit the student movement involved in the October Square tent city and the flash-mob movement into the Coalition. Although Korniyenko could not say whether the students had yet agreed, Gryaznova told Pol/Econ Chief that the students had refused, and "rightly so." According to Gryaznova, the flash mobs' effectiveness laid within their spontaneity and lack of hierarchy. To fall under the bureaucratic control of the Coalition would have only weakened their movement.

Other Problems

18. (C) Korniyenko believes that if the Coalition had had evidence proving election falsification and had the means to advertise the falsifications, more people would have come to the streets. However, the GOB's tight control over the media and the "lack of objectiveness" in Gallup's polling did not give the Coalition much to use. (Note: Korniyenko said those who conducted the polling surveys were too frightened to perform a thorough survey. To the best of Post's knowledge, neither Gallup nor any other independent polling service conducted exit polling.) According to Korniyenko, the Coalition never really had many options. In addition, many

so-called democratic leaders and parties, including the Grodno UCP branch and Vitebsk civil society leader Olga Karach, refused to participate in the elections or help the opposition and then further discredited the Coalition by criticizing its strategy.

¶9. (C) Korniyenko highlighted the negative influence from Georgian activists during and after the elections and cited what had happened at the latest conference in Vilnius. According to Korniyenko, the resident Georgian Consul, in front of conference attendees, accused the Coalition of having too many BKGB members in its ranks, lambasted the opposition for not overrunning government buildings, and claimed opposition leaders paid the GOB to arrest them to boost their political image. Korniyenko said Georgia's hostility and accusations against Milinkevich are direct results of Georgia's support for Lebedko.

Comment

¶10. (C) Gryaznova's and Korniyenko's testimonies confirm the rumors Post has heard of power struggles and fragmentation within the Coalition. The sources of the problem are not just the political aspirations of Lebedko and Milinkevich, but also the conflicting interests of the Ten Plus Coalition parties. Unfortunately, this in-house bickering is hindering the opposition's ability to promote democratic change.

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